



# STRENGTH *in* Numbers

Data-driven collaboration may not sound sexy,  
but it could save your job

By Toni Buzzeo

*What if I told you* that I knew a practical, sure-fire way for media specialists to boost student achievement? A tried-and-true approach that would not only produce undeniable results, but—who knows?—even save some of our jobs? The method is called data-driven collaboration, and it's a practical, easy-to-use technique in which media specialists and teachers work together to pinpoint kids' instructional needs and improve their essential skills.

Illustration by James Steinberg.



I became a huge fan of this approach four years ago, when Stephanie Wilson, coordinator of the school library system at New York's Greater Southern Tier BOCES, and I were working with teams of teachers and librarians to develop collaborative projects. Although these teachers valued information literacy skills and viewed librarians as desirable teaching partners, they weren't sure if they could spare the time to work with them. They were already feeling overwhelmed, trying to squeeze everything—both the regular curriculum and test-related content—into their lessons. Listening to these dedicated teachers, I suddenly had an “aha!” moment. In fact, Stephanie and I were both hit by the same lightning bolt. What if teachers and librarians started basing the goals of their joint projects on student test results? That way, teachers wouldn't have to shoulder the entire burden of increasing kids' test scores all by themselves. And as scores began to soar, librarians would be in greater demand as teaching partners. It quickly became clear to me that the key to our profession's success was data-driven collaboration.

Since that eye-opening discovery, I've written articles, delivered keynote speeches, and presented professional development workshops at state and national conferences on this topic. I've even devoted an entire chapter to data-driven collaboration in my latest professional book, *The Collaboration Handbook* (Linworth, 2008). And yet, when it comes to school librarians, few of us see this approach for what it is—one of the essential keys to our job security.

That's a rather bald statement, of course, smacking of self-interest. And if data-driven collaboration was only that—job security—well, I'd scoff at it myself. But here's the truth. That's a secondary benefit. The primary purpose of all instructional collaboration between teachers and librarians is to improve student learning and achievement. And on that score, data-driven collaboration is a definite shoo-in.

## The nuts and bolts

So, how's it done? First, you must have a good team-teaching relationship with some of your colleagues. Then you need to familiarize yourself with your school's test data and curriculum content. After that, it's a simple, six-step process:

1. **Identify a project to tackle.** Select a topic or unit that your partner would love to teach—one that would be enhanced by working together. Or as I've done successfully, choose a topic your partner loathes and make it much more palatable—and even fun!—by teaching it as a team.
2. **Examine the test data.** At the very beginning of the process, when you're looking at the content area standards and the American Association of School Librarians' multiple literacy standards you'll be incorporating into your lessons, be sure to examine students' test results and determine what they *don't* know. Then ask how those deficits relate to the lessons you'll be presenting.
3. **Target the skills that need improvement.** Remember, if students practice those skills as they're learning the subject

area content (be it American history, ecosystems, or Renaissance art), they'll be more apt to internalize the skills than if you rely on a standard drill-and-practice approach.

4. **Look carefully at the constructed response questions.** These are those test questions where students are asked to write a coherent—and sometimes lengthy—answer to a test question. Unlike multiple choice questions, constructed response items are more likely to accurately reveal a student's true knowledge, or lack of it.
5. **Focus on two or three subskills.** Did most of your students miss the same multiple choice question? Determine whether the question was simply worded poorly or if your students are actually missing an essential skill.
6. **Don't forget to document student achievement.** Let's say your fifth graders scored low on identifying the main idea or supporting details. You'll want to track their progress carefully the next time they take the standardized test.

## Putting theory into practice

Does data-driven collaboration work in the real world of schools and libraries? Yes, it actually does! Susan Grigsby, a teacher-librarian at Elkins Pointe Middle School in Roswell, GA, has had enormous success with a readers' theater project that's based on this approach.

Last year, Susan joined forces with remedial reading teacher Gil Rodriguez to work with his class of 10 boys. “The boys fell into several at-risk categories: male, Latino/Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged,” explains Susan. “Overall, these were boys who did not engage in the classroom. One of them even said he didn't like school because he couldn't read. Our readers' theater unit helped him to see that he could read after all—albeit not at grade level. This unit was designed to put some joy back into the reading process and give them an opportunity to experience success.”

Susan and Gil analyzed the data from their county-specific Checkpoint test (administered four times a year and believed to be an indicator of success on the state Criterion Referenced Competency Test), and found these seventh graders were scoring an average of 28 percent on the language arts sections—or 22 to 42 percent *lower* than their peers. Drilling down to the individual domains, it was easy to see that the kids' greatest deficits related to the following standards and benchmarks:

ELA (English Language Arts) 7R1. The student demonstrates comprehension and shows evidence of a warranted and responsible explanation of a variety of literary and informational texts. The student:

- b. Interprets a character's traits, emotions, or motivations and gives supporting evidence from a text.
- f. Analyzes characterization (dynamic and static) in prose and plays as delineated through a character's thoughts, words, speech patterns, and actions; the narrator's description; and the thoughts, words, and actions of other characters.
- h. Identifies and analyzes how an author's use of words creates tone and mood, giving supporting evidence from text.



## Want to learn more about data-driven collaboration?

### Check out these first-rate resources...

Brake, Kate Vande, ed. **Collaborative Units that Work: TEAMS Award Winners.** Linworth, 2009.

Presents award-winning collaborative K-12 projects that have a positive impact on student achievement.

Buzzeo, Toni. **The Collaboration Handbook.** Linworth, 2008.

Takes a comprehensive look at working with teachers, librarians, and administrators, with a careful eye toward data-based collaboration.

Buzzeo, Toni. "Make the Move from Collaboration to Data-Driven Collaboration." *Library Media Connection* November/December 2008, pp. 28-31.

Provides school librarians with guidelines on how to use data-driven collaboration in their own libraries.

Buzzeo, Toni and Stephanie Wilson. "Data-Driven Collaboration in Two Voices." *Library Media Connection* October 2007, pp. 20-23.

Argues that teacher-librarian collaborative instruction is the most effective way to teach information literacy skills and boost student achievement.

Capitol Region BOCES School Library System: **Evidence Based Practice Resources** [wiki.crbcls.org/index.php/Evidence\\_Based\\_Practice\\_Resources](http://wiki.crbcls.org/index.php/Evidence_Based_Practice_Resources) - February 2010.

Provides up-to-date links to resources on evidence-based practice, a teaching strategy that's been championed by Ross Todd, director of the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries at Rutgers University.

Kramer, Pamela K. and Linda Diekman. "Evidence = Assessment = Advocacy." *Teacher-Librarian* February 2010, pp. 27-30.

Advocates evidence-gathering by school librarians in order to demonstrate their impact on student achievement.

**Library Research Service: School Library Information** [www.lrs.org/school](http://www.lrs.org/school)  
Offers links to school library research studies as well as PowerPoint presentations by researcher Keith Curry Lance, former director of the Library Research Service of the Colorado State Library and the University of Denver.

Moreillon, Judi. "Coteaching Published Lesson Plans: A Recipe for Success?" *School Library Media Activities Monthly* January 2009, pp. 29-30.

Emphasizes the importance of team teaching and collaboration to improve student learning.

Zmuda, Allison and Violet H. Harada. **Librarians as Learning Specialists: Meeting the Learning Imperative for the 21st Century.** Libraries Unlimited, 2008.

Argues that school librarians are uniquely qualified to serve as leaders who improve instruction and, ultimately, student achievement.

ELA 7R2. The student understands and acquires new vocabulary and uses it correctly in reading and writing. The student:

- a. Determines the meaning of unfamiliar words using context clues.

Surprisingly, the boys scored a little higher in the following area:

ELA 7R3. The student reads aloud, accurately (in the range of 95 percent), familiar material in a variety of genres, in a way that makes meaning clear to listeners. The student:

- a. Uses self-correction when subsequent reading indicates an earlier miscue (self-monitoring and self-correcting strategies).

- b. Reads with rhythm, flow, and meter that sound like everyday speech (prosody).

By having the class practice and perform a readers' theater version of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death," Susan tapped into one of their relative strengths (oral reading) to jump-start improvement in their weakest areas—comprehension (ELA 7R1) and vocabulary (ELA 7R2). Readers' theater was also a perfect opportunity for these kids to get a much better idea of the characters' speech patterns, motivations, and emotions (ELA 7R1 f.).

Susan had another sound reason for using readers' theater (RT) with this group of reluctant readers: "It gave the boys a forum for reading aloud in a way that required ownership of a particular portion of the script. When reading aloud in the classroom, even if using a fiction passage, the student was simply reading a passage out of the book; however, when performing RT, the student had a particular set of lines that belonged to him and him alone. We gave each student complete freedom in using whatever voice he felt comfortable with. At first, most simply read the passage, but slowly they began experimenting with characterizations to give their lines a different feel. They found some enjoyment in entertaining each other with their characters and suddenly something they had found to be a chore (reading aloud) became fun." In other words, the boys came to understand the text in a deep and meaningful way which allowed them to interpret characters intellectually and voice that interpretation in their reading.

Readers' theater also provided these boys with a fail-safe way to learn. "Experimenting with character interpretation allowed them to cover themselves when they hit words they didn't know or sounded out incorrectly," says Susan. "The atmosphere was light so the mistakes weren't focused upon but rather seen as development of character. By the time the program was performed, each of the boys had acquired several new, age-appropriate sight words."

And no wonder! Not only were these kids given an opportunity to perform the short story for their peers (and to record the performance on video), but they were also planning to present their performance to high school students via Skype. "The idea of performing their reading to the older kids made a huge difference in their engagement," says Susan. "I just wanted them to be able to see themselves as high school students and thought performing for students who looked

like them at the high school level would help them recognize themselves as possible success stories."

I hope I've convinced you to give data-driven collaboration a whirl. If we media specialists want our teaching colleagues to think of us as equals, we need to work hand in hand with them to address students' learning deficits. Will data-driven collaboration save our jobs? It certainly might. More importantly, will it benefit our students' learning and achievement? It most definitely will!

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